

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Arthur W. McCurdy, December 13, 1896, with transcript

copy of a letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Arthur W. McCurdy "H" folder 1331
CONNECTICUT AVENUE WASHINGTON, D. C. 1896 Dec. 13 — Sunday Dear Mr. McCurdy:

I want to begin work with you tomorrow as I wish to go on with it in the future, and therefore put down a few thoughts as they occur to me tonight.

Our first and foremost business will be to attend to the mail matter that comes tomorrow. Provide a mail-bag or box into which all mail matter (excepting private mail of Elsie and Mrs. Bell) may be put, and a mail-bag (or something equivalent) to be used for carrying the mail to our office in the Volta Bureau, that is — two mail-holders. One fixed in the house — into which everything for us may be placed — and the other — portable for you to take mail-matter to the office.

I am anxious to look over the accounts for the last year — and look into financial matters. I am anxious to reply to letters that have been waiting for a long time. I am anxious to take up dictation work concerning Laboratory experiments and I feel the necessity of some system in our work. Everything has been drifting for so long a time that our work is in confusion — no — not merely in confusion — it is actually in a chaotic condition and you and I have not come together for literary purposes for an age. I quite understand that this is entirely my own fault and I sympathise with you in having to work with such an un-systematic man as myself. You have always been willing to give me your time when I was willing to look into matters and unfortunately my time did not correspond to any one else's time — and I was never willing to face everyday matters in proper season. Now here is a

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chance to make a new beginning and I want you to help me. Let us begin 2 tomorrow. I want to try (at all events) to have some system.

I have been thinking a good deal over the matter ever since I returned to Washington and will tell you my plans so far as I have been able to formulate them.

First and foremost — our work must be done in an office — not here. When we are here we must be able to throw all business on one side, and be free. We have our office now in the Volta Bureau.

Next comes office hours. Here I cannot trust myself, but I can trust you. I want you to have regular office hours — however irregular I may be. I don't want to keep you up half the night over matters that should be done in the day-time — decently and in order.

I want you to be free to enjoy yourself or do anything you want to do — after the office hours are over. I don't care what those hours are, so long as you are satisfied with them. Won't you please find out what the office hours are in the Government Departments and let ours correspond.

Now as to business. You are my private secretary and Alter Ego to the world. Your first business then is to attend to my correspondence . At present there is none, or very little, but this is because we have neglected it. People are tired of writing and receiving no answer. The moment we attend to it it will revive ad .

We have back correspondence to attend to and we will probably have mail matter of some sort tomorrow . Which shall we begin with?

Let our first duty be — no I should say — your first duty be to answer tomorrow the letters or communications that come tomorrow. Let everything that comes be answered to the best of your ability the same day it arrives . Prepare the replies as you think best before I come and submit 3 them to me for my approval or modification and if you cannot get my

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attention send an answer of some sort the same day . I can trust your judgement in this. In most cases you can reply quite independently of me, and in important matters you can acknowledge receipt the same day and then do your best to get me to attend to it later.

I feel quite sure that our first duty is to the correspondence and the only way we can hope to get square on that is to take up the new correspondence first and let the old take the second place after that. No, even before the old correspondence should come the financial statement for the year and the consideration of financial matters for the future.

1. Then let your first business tomorrow be — preparing answers to the mail-matter that arrives tomorrow.
2. Then get your financial statements ready for me to look over and discuss.
3. Sort out all old un-answered letters and make drafts of replies for my consideration.

The daily correspondence first everyday, and before everything else.

I am sure that both you and I will be happier if we can bring some system into our work and be free to enjoy ourselves in the evenings after our day's work is over.

Do help me — there's a good fellow.

Yours sincerely, (signed) Alexander Graham Bell
Mr. Arthur W. McCurdy
Washington, D. C.